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Thais Probe Adventurers' Search for POWs in Laos

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BANGKOK, Feb. 21—It was around midday on Feb. 3, 1971, when U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Robert Standerwick bailed out of his F4 Phantom jet while flying a reconnaissance mission over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in eastern Laos.

According to U.S. Embassy records here, Standerwick was known to be alive on the ground in heavy jungle south of the Mugia Pass when his copilot, Maj. Norbert Gotner, who had also ejected safely, heard gunfire in the area.

"I'm hit, I'm hit," Standerwick radioed to his wingman flying overhead. "I'm going to give up." Gotner was captured by Vietnamese troops, imprisoned for two years and released. But that was the last ever heard from Standerwick, one of nearly 2,500 U.S. servicemen listed by the Pentagon as missing in Indochina and presumed dead.

Now, 12 years later, Standerwick's daughter, Lynn, 25, and another American, U.S. Special Forces veteran, Lance Edward Trimmer, 43, are under investi-

gation in northeastern Thailand for involvement in illegal forays led by retired Special Forces officer and Vietnam war hero James G. (Bo) Gritz to search for American prisoners of war who he believes are still alive in Laos.

Trimmer and Standerwick were arrested Feb. 13 at a rented house in the town of Nakhon Phanom in northeastern Thailand just across the Mekong River from Laos. They were jailed for two days and charged with possession of an unlicensed radio transmitter, an offense punishable by a five-year jail term. Also found in the house were fatigues, scuba diving equipment, jungle knives, cartridge belts and a gas mask.

The two Americans, now free on bail, rejected the charges and denied involvement in Gritz's rescue efforts. But a former Gritz associate who says he participated in Operation Lazarus, an unsuccessful Hollywood-financed raid into Laos in November, has said Trimmer and Standerwick were involved in communications support for Gritz's operations.

Their presence in Nakhon Phanom has fueled speculation that the 44-year-old former Green Beret lieutenant colonel, the Oklahoma-born son of a bomber pilot killed in World War II, may have launched another foray into Laos with another group of American veterans.

[The Los Angeles Times reported Monday that it had received a 12-page handwritten letter from Gritz saying he and two other Americans are in Laos on a new rescue mission. The letter, carried out of Laos by a runner, said Gritz had found "some POW ID" but did not describe it.

[The Times quoted the letter, which was dated Feb. 12, as saying both the Central Intelligence Agency and Defense Intelligence Agency were aware of Gritz's plans. Spokesmen for both agencies denied Gritz's allegations to the Times.]

The Thai police Special Branch has stepped up a search for Gritz in Thailand, and both Vietnamese troops and forces of the Communist Pathet Lao government in Vientiane are reported to be hunting him and his men in the jungles of Laos.

The episode and the tangled tale surrounding it illustrate the powerful emotions that still color the issue of prisoners-of-war and servicemen missing-in-action 10 years after the last American combat troops withdrew from Vietnam. But they also serve to crack open a window on Thailand's murky underworld of foreign mercenaries, private army-resistance groups and intelligence operatives who often are united only by their opposition to the Communist governments in Indochina.

Gritz, his associates and their activities also raise questions about top U.S. government officials' role in and attitude toward his private POW rescue operations. The government has denied any involvement in Operation Lazarus, saying it neither supports nor condones such actions and considers them "very unhelpful" to official efforts to resolve POW-MIA issues. The Justice Department has said it has the case "under review."

However, a participant in Operation Lazarus, former Special Forces sergeant Charles Patterson of Dinuba, Calif., has said that President Reagan was told about the operation and gave it his tacit blessing at a meeting set up by actor Clint Eastwood at Reagan's California ranch.

[A White House spokeswoman in Washington said she had "no knowledge of such a meeting" and added that the government does not "support or condone cross-border forays which serve to jeopardize" other efforts to obtain information about possible American captives in Indochina. She said people "involved" in such efforts "have been so informed."]

An "operations plan," purportedly written by Gritz, says it was assumed that "the U.S. government cannot commit official assets until positive proof of U.S. POW presence is provided," but that "once such a determination has been made the U.S.G. will follow the president's stated pol-

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